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New York Times Report on Cabinet Discussion
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They Call Him Cap the Knife

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 3, 1985

By CLYDE H. FARNSWORTH

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 2 — There he goes again.

In his first four years as Defense Secretary, Caspar W. Weinberger resisted any economic accommodation with Moscow and rejected efforts to trim the growth of United States military spending.

He fought the European allies over their willingness to help build and finance a Soviet natural gas pipeline. He fought newspaper editors over their insistence that reporters accompany military units on such operations as the invasion of Grenada.

He is, on the other hand, the Cabinet's most prolific writer of letters to the editor, acting, as he puts it, "to set the record straight for the benefit of Congress and the public."

Over his objections a compromise was reached last month between the White House and Senate Republicans cutting the growth in the military budget for the next fiscal year to 3 percent on top of an increase to make up for inflation — much less than what he had deemed essential.

Again over his protests the Cabinet agreed last winter to permit Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige to visit Moscow May 20-21. The aim: to improve trade relations as part of a grand design in the Reagan Administration's second term to get a better political relationship with Moscow.

Now Mr. Weinberger is living up to his reputation as the most tenacious and zealous of the President's Cabinet advisers. He has just made an unusual 11th-hour appeal directly to Mr. Reagan to block the Baldrige trip to Moscow.

Rarely does one Cabinet officer oppose another's journey abroad. But this time the stakes are much higher than usual, according to Administration officials close to the Pentagon chief who disclosed details of the action on condition that they not be identified.

Last Saturday at a meeting of the National Security Council Mr. Weinberger argued that the trip should be canceled or at least postponed for three reasons:

¶To protest the March 24 killing of Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr. by a Soviet soldier in East Germany.

¶To prevent Mr. Baldrige from entering into any commitments in Moscow that would lead to United States sales of advanced oil industry equipment that the Russians are seeking to boost lagging oil production.

¶To avoid inadvertently helping Nicaragua in its request for economic aid from Moscow. Theoretically, anything that results in improved trade relations with the United States could help Moscow raise hard-currency loans from banks in this country and elsewhere, which in turn could help the Sandinistas.

Mr. Weinberger's arguments did not carry. The majority of the National Security Council sided with Mr. Baldrige, who told a reporter Wednesday that the trip was on. "The President is doing his best with the Soviets to establish a better working relationship," Mr. Baldrige said. "Trade is one of the ways."

The President did not attend the Saturday meeting. Mr. Weinberger, showing his obstinacy one more time when he thinks he is right, declined to accept the majority decision of his colleagues and has gone to the President directly, according to one informant. "We're still waiting to hear the final results," the informant added.

On the Moscow 'Wish List'

Moscow has provided a "wish list" of what it hopes to get from the meeting with Mr. Baldrige. Some of the advanced oil-exploration equipment on the list could also be used for submarine detection, according to Pentagon sources. Another item is a plant to produce Kevlar, a material of high strength, high tenacity and a high melting point used here to produce the MX missile. Yet another item is robotics.

"The Russians expect us to believe they want this simply to help them manufacture blue jeans," one Administration official said.

Mr. Weinberger is consistent. He has argued for years that Western technology has been of immeasurable aid in Moscow's military buildup. He opposes sales of energy equipment because oil exports have been Moscow's principal source of hard-currency earnings, which also support the military buildup, he says.

Whether it be trade with Moscow, the budget conflicts or any other point of Washington battle, most of those who have dealt with Mr. Weinberger have come away impressed by his pertinacity, if not by his point of view.

"He's a million rubber bands in his resilience," said Senator Alan K. Simpson, Republican of Wyoming, after one of the budget battles. "You can't come away without the richest regard for the tenacity of the man."